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ARCHIVE

Government helped fund license photo data base



Published Feb. 18, 1999 | Updated Sep. 28, 2005

Image Data, whose purchase of Florida drivers' photos was canceled by Gov. Bush, also got help from the Secret Service.

A small New Hampshire company that wants to build a national data base of driver's license photographs received nearly \$1.5-million in federal funds and technical assistance from the Secret Service last year, according to documents and interviews with officials involved in the project.

Congressional leaders who helped make those arrangements envisioned using the photo file to combat terrorism, immigration abuses and other identity crimes — applications that appear to go beyond recent company claims the data base would be used only to prevent check and credit-card fraud.

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"The TrueID technology has widespread potential to reduce crime in the credit and checking fields, in airports to reduce the chances of terrorism, and in immigration and naturalization to verify proper identity," said a letter about Image Data Corp. from eight members of Congress in September 1997. "The Secret Service can provide technical assistance and assess the effectiveness of this new technology."

These details about Image Data's development add to a privacy debate that was touched off last month by reports that the Nashua, N.H., company recently bought more than 22-million drivers images in South Carolina, Florida and Colorado.

As the company lobbied to gain access to motor vehicle files, officials apparently told few people about its ties to the Secret Service or the money it received from Congress. State legislators, motor vehicle administrators and others who worked with the company said in interviews they had no knowledge that federal officials might be involved. Several officials from Florida and South Carolina said they now feel misled by the company.



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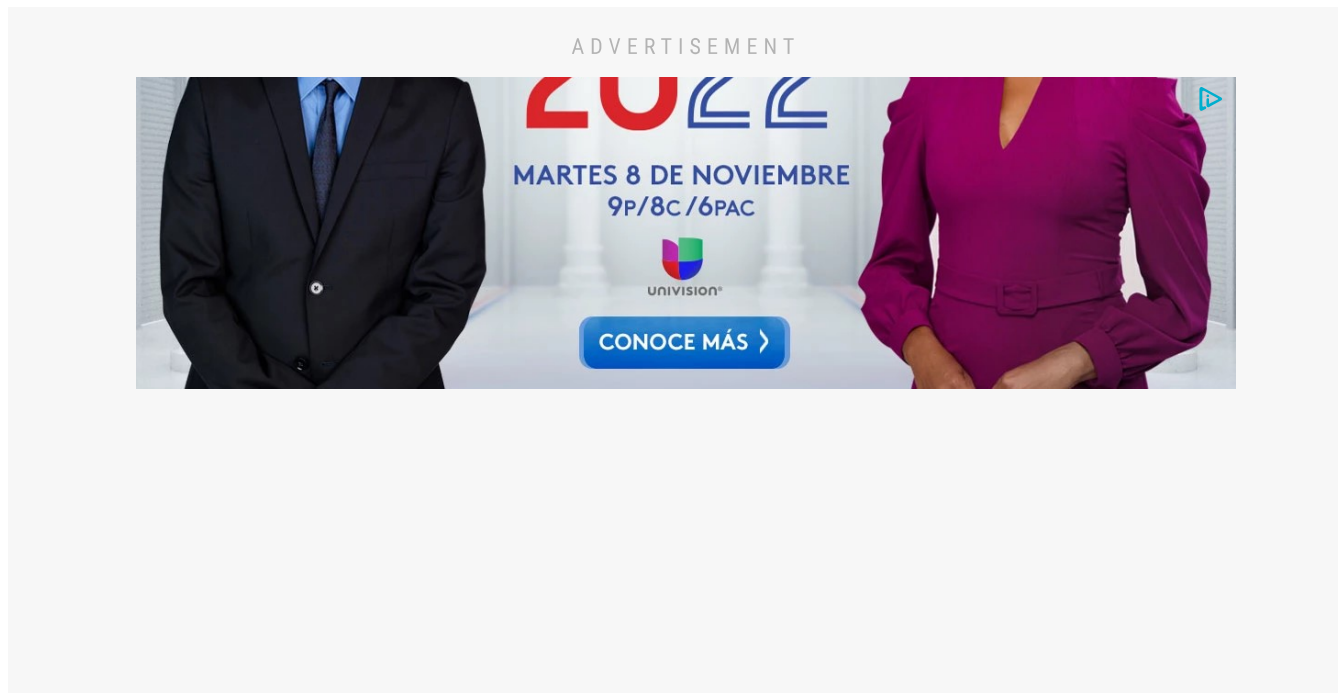
By Healthy Gem

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different purpose."



The company paid a penny apiece, or \$140,000, to use the images.

In Colorado, Gov. Bill Owens halted the sale of 5-million images, while the state legislature pushed through a bill that would ban the transfer.

South Carolina Attorney General Charles M. Condon sued the company for the return of 3.5-million digital photographs already being used in a pilot project there. A state judge rejected that claim last week, saying the company's "True ID" system is "no more intrusive on the privacy of an individual than showing the driver's license itself." Condon is appealing the decision.

State legislators, meanwhile, have proposed laws blocking future sales, and a South Carolina woman filed a class-action lawsuit this week seeking to stop Image Data from using the images. Officials in Florida, Colorado and New York also have said they intend to study sales of personal information by their states.

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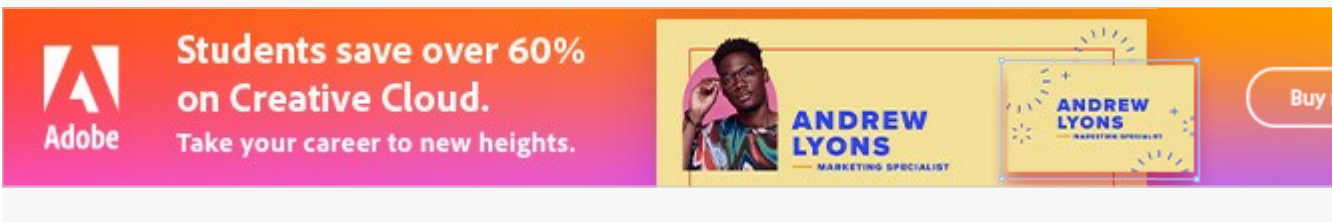
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d the company's efforts, saying
its numbers and personal data

In an interview Wednesday, Image Data founder Robert Houvener said he thinks his company has the potential to save billions of dollars in losses to identity theft. Houvener said that's why he sought federal assistance and welcomed the advice of the Secret Service, which investigates identity theft and electronic crimes.

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Houvener downplayed any contradiction between his recent statements and the potential uses cited by congressional supporters, saying in every instance the technology would be used to prevent a fraudulent transaction.

"An airline counter is the same as a counter at a 7-Eleven," Houvener said. "It's the exact same situation. All you're trying to do is prevent fraudulent transactions."

Florida officials said they are skeptical.

"The arguments against this program become much more credible if the federal government and others ultimately intended to use the technology and data on Americans for purposes broader than fighting retail fraud," said state Rep. Tom Feeney, R-Oviedo, who, after meeting with an Image Data's lobbyist, sponsored a law enabling the sale of the photographs last year.

Houvener said several newspapers mentioned the federal funds and the Secret Service role when they were first approved and so he assumed that people knew about these matters.

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Houvener, however, briefly al budget. He said Condon, the him in the case, had asked about

Condon said he intends to review Houverner's statements to determine if he misled the court. "We don't want to be a guinea pig for the federal government to experiment on how to solve federal problems."

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A Secret Service official said the agency did not seek to be included in the effort. But the official, who is overseeing the project, also saw a chance to help Image Data tailor its technology to fight crime.

"We were trying to show them positive ways the system could work," said Cary Rosoff, who visited the company's pilot program in South Carolina in December.

"Our feeling was, if the government was going to invest money into the program, why not make it work as well as it can?"

— Information from Times files was used in this report.

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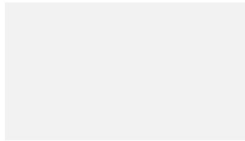
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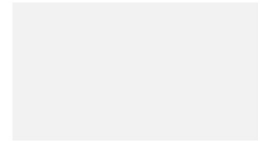
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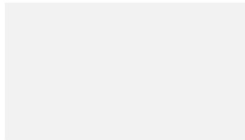
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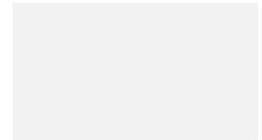
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